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LAPSES BY REAGAN PLEASE DEMOCRATS

Tendency to Misstate Is Seen as 'Wild Card' in Campaign

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 30 — The unexpected sight of President Reagan struggling with political problems created by his impromptu remarks on foreign policy has made some Democratic leaders hope Walter F. Mondale can claw his way back into contention in the Presidential race.

On Thursday Mr. Reagan accused reporters of distorting his statement linking the Sept. 20 bombing of the United States Embassy in Lebanon to cutbacks in the American intelligence services before he took office.

Four days earlier Mr. Reagan had made himself a target of Democratic criticism by comparing incomplete security precautions at the embassy to an unfinished remodeling job on a home kitchen. Two American servicemen and an unknown number of Lebanese were killed in the bombing.

Unfavorable TV Coverage

This series of statements produced what White House advisers described Friday as the most unfavorable television coverage for the President since he opened his re-election campaign on Labor Day. Today Vice President Bush said in Cleveland that it made "some sense" for President Reagan to accept responsibility for the embassy bombing. [Page B10.]

Mr. Mondale took aim at the Reagan comments, but he and other Democratic leaders also worked hard at making the point that the President's campaign is basically theatrical, and that even such potentially valuable events as his meeting with Andrei A. Gromyko, the Soviet Foreign Minister, are simply "photo opportunities."

Mr. Mondale said today that "no progress was made" at that meeting. "The American people have seen the pictures and read the captions," he said, "but when it comes to war and peace, that's not nearly enough."

Outside the 'Movie Facade'

The events of the week also stirred Mondale advisers and such Democrats as Senator Gary Hart of Colorado to suggest that Mr. Reagan's apparent political invincibility would crumble if he ventured outside what Mr. Hart called the "movie facade" of campaign rallies staged by White House political managers.

The exchanges between Reagan and Mondale supporters underscored the importance both sides attach to Mr. Reagan's tendency toward misstatement, which they see as a "wild card" in the nationally televised campaign debates scheduled for Oct. 7 and 21.

Senior White House officials have conceded privately that they regard such mistakes, and the apprehension of some voters over Mr. Reagan's ability to keep the nation out of war, as the two areas most likely to create a controversy heated enough to disrupt the smooth-running Reagan campaign.

However, Reagan campaign officials asserted that their public opinion polls show that the President had suffered no damage from what the Democrats call his "gaffes" over the embassy bombing. Several Reagan campaign officials said Mr. Reagan had a lead of 20 percentage points over the Democratic challenger.

The Reagan advisers added that "tracking polls" conducted by the campaign to measure daily shifts in public opinion showed specifically that Mr. Reagan's popularity had not been damaged by the bombing or his statements on it.

Mondale 'Tuned Out'

"The public sees Ronald Reagan as a very strong, solid leader as opposed to Walter Mondale as a weak leader prone to flip-flops," said James H. Lake, press secretary of Reagan-Bush '84. "For all intents and purposes, they've tuned out Mondale."

Despite Republican efforts to play down Mr. Reagan's comments about kitchen repairs and reductions in American intelligence operations, Mondale advisers and some independent political experts regarded the remarks as almost equal in importance to the meetings Mr. Reagan and Mr. Mondale held last week with Mr. Gromyko.

For these observers Mr. Reagan's comments stirred memories of the misstatements that hobbled his 1980 campaign in its early stages. They also aroused Democratic hopes that the President might prove to be mistake-prone if he can be confronted outside the colorful rallies arranged by the White House staff.

Mr. Reagan's remarks "showed he's a safe candidate when he's kept in his photo-opportunity campaign style," said Robert G. Beckel, the manager of the Mondale campaign.

Remarks Popped Out

He observed that both Mr. Reagan's remarks had popped out unexpectedly. While posing for a photograph on Sept. 22 he told reporters that delays in constructing security barriers at the embassy could be understood by "anyone that's ever had their kitchen done over."

The suggestion that President Carter and earlier Presidents were responsible in part for the attack by the way they handled the intelligence services was offered in response to a question from a student at Bowling Green University.

The two events were "not in their campaign plan," said Mr. Beckel. "Reagan does well when he's scripted, and this week the script didn't work well."

In an effort to put the matter behind them Mr. Reagan's advisers altered last week's political script to include a telephone call from Mr. Reagan to Mr. Carter to clarify the remarks.

Mr. Beckel said Mondale campaign polls show the former Vice President trailing by about 15 points. Polls showing a much wider margin for Mr. Reagan, he contended, were "reflective of old moods."

Optimism Only Partly Shared

The optimism expressed by Mr. Beckel and James A. Johnson, Mr. Mondale's campaign chairman, was partly shared by many Democrats, but it remained difficult last week to find a Democratic political professional in Washington not on the payroll of the Mondale campaign who would privately predict a Mondale victory.

But Mr. Reagan's blunders and Mr. Mondale's recent more energetic performance raised hopes that the Presidential race would tighten up enough to prevent a disaster for the Democrats in Congressional races.

"I have always said Mondale had to get close and press and wait for errors, because Reagan has made errors in the past and will again," said Raymond J. Strother, a consultant working in several Democratic Congressional campaigns.